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ABSTRACT

Perspectives on having an "uncommon" faculty teach general education courses are offered, based in part on the experience of Pennsylvania State University. An uncommon faculty members is one who is willing to spend time with students, to learn in areas outside his or her "major" field of mastered interest, to be a fellow learner instead of a dispenser of answers, and to admit not knowing answers when appropriate. The successful general education faculty will be uncommon in another sense: they will come from a variety of disciplines or colleges, even from nonfaculty administrative positions. At Penn State approximately 6,000 students take general education courses each year from an undergraduate population of about 56,000. The general education program offers 10 different courses in the humanities, international understanding, and social sciences. All faculty hold appointments in academic departments. Students are not required to take the general education courses, which are offered as alternatives to discipline courses, and which also satisfy the university baccalaureate or distribution courses. The students are active learners who seek to challenge and to question, and who view the instructor as a fellow-seeker of knowledge. (SW)

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PREREQUISITE FOR COMMON LEARNING: AN UNCOMMON FACULTY

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A couple of years ago, Ernest Boyer and Arthur Levine attracted considerable attention to a growing problem in American higher education: the need for continued reform general education. The QUILL and GEM projects, heavily funded at certain selected institutions, attempted once again to "remake or reform" general education. In the past year, two more nationally funded studies have emerged--the National Institute of Education's Involvement on Learning (the Mortimer report) and the National Endowment for the Humanities' To Reclaim a Legacy (the Bennett report). These studies all have one common theme, regardless of their individual emphases, and that theme is that something, rather a multitude of things, is wrong with American higher education, especially in the area of general education, liberal education, baccalaureate degree requirements, distribution requirements, graduation requirements, or any other names by which the non-major, non-elective segment of a baccalaureate program is called.

I have gone back to Boyer and Levine's little volume, entitled Common Learning and to the first chapter wherein "the Quest for Common Learning" is described. As one long involved in general education, I find the term "common learning" a bit distasteful at first. I guess it goes back to the days when I was, some five decades ago, the "knuckles-down" marble shooting champion of the Pearl Avenue grade school in Oil City, Pennsylvania. We marble shooters carried three kinds of marbles in our buckskin marble pouches: "glassies," "aggies," and "commies." The "glassies" were beautiful clear glass with spiral patterns of multi-colored glass molded within them; the "aggies" were colored glass of a porcelain or agate texture and appearance; and the "commies" were common clay, more or less round, and cheaply glazed in faded shades of brick red, dark blue, and yellow and much despised by the better marble shooters. They were the sorriest marbles ever made.

As a result of those long-past memories and a host of other experiences, I, like most other people, have a somewhat negative attitude toward the word "common." The common man is praised, but who wants to be a common man or woman?

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Over the past two years, however, I have come to appreciate Boyer and Levine's use of the term. And they took a chance, too, for I do not have to remind you that far too many members of the professoriate believe that the narrowly-focused, major courses which prepare students for careers are the "glassies" of the academic marble bag while the general education, common requirements, or "shared experiences," as Ernest Boyer has identified them, are the "commies" of little value. "Faculty members who devote themselves to general education run the risk of losing touch with their disciplines, and frequently they are not rewarded for their effort at tenure and promotion time" (CL, 19). Anyone who has been around a university very long can give anecdote after anecdote of a colleague who "was right on the cutting edge of his discipline" until he began dabbling in general education or common learning and fell from grace into disgrace.

I personally have come to dislike the term "common learning," for it implies a core or common set of courses which all students must take and hopefully learn something from the taking. I much prefer "common experiences" that allow a number of courses, hopefully selected by the students because of the topic, course title, or instructor. There are many ways to arrive at an integrated undergraduate experience which prepares the student to live as well as to earn a living, but the one ingredient which must be present is a faculty with whom the students can interact in a lively, active, non-passive mode. Involvement in Learning speaks often of the passivity of students and the need to do something about that passivity. Jack Newell has critiqued the study in Change: "it identifies student disengagement as the most common denominator among the forces that have diminished the quality of undergraduate life," but it suggests few ways of changing student attitudes to those of active engagement, other than treating them as fellow learners. And herein is the key to a revitalizing of general or liberal learning: faculty and students must be fellow learners or co-learners.

William Bennett comes close when he comments that there must be engagement. The possibility for lively engagement is lost, however, when he declares, "First and foremost, a teacher must have achieved mastery of the material." The implication, of course, is that the teacher must also be credentialed and otherwise certified or recognized as a scholar in that area. Then the practice is to ladle out the material mastered at a pace suitable for ingestion and later reproduction by the students. But that is not effective learning. Perhaps this method works in a course for majors, but it falls far short of what is demanded in general education. I am always reminded of a group of students I once taught in Africa who were accustomed to the European model of examinations. They wanted me to tell them what several of Robert Frost's poems "meant," so that I could then ask them examination questions on these poems and they could give the answers (my answers) back to me and thus pass the test. I told them that I had once--and this is a true story--heard Robert Frost tell a breathless, excited young graduate student, who had just explicated one of Frost's poems for him at a party, "I don't know what that poem means, I just wrote it." If he didn't know what "the Road Not Taken" meant, what right does an English faculty member have to tell a group of undergraduates what the poem means?

In changing the undergraduate mind set and attitudes from passive to active, we as faculty must learn to ask the questions together with them, not dispense the answers from on high. I am excited about the possibilities of actively engaging

faculty and students in a mutual learning situation--where each can learn from the other. Thus I have an intense dislike for team-taught general education courses in which three or four experts from representative disciplines lecture on their special areas of knowledge and share cute little bits of esoterica with each other while the students, overwhelmed by all this learning, dutifully clutch their pencils and scribe-like record every word they can.

How refreshing it is to read of Peter Beidler, Professor of English at Lehigh University, who was named Professor of the Year in 1983 by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. Dr. Beidler has conducted a number of workshops in which he encourages what he calls "bored and boring" faculty to teach a course in a field they know little about. He was described in a Chronicle article recently as saying that "the first time you teach a course is the most fun because the material is new and you are being a student again." He describes how he taught a course on American Indians by selecting a half a dozen paperbacks and then reading and discussing them with his students. He also states that "We became professors in part because we enjoyed being students. . .," and "only the proficient actors can keep giving the same old routines to an increasingly unresponsive audience."

Beidler is talking about uncommon faculty. Professor Beidler is an uncommon faculty member. I want to talk about uncommon faculty from some other perspectives. An uncommon faculty member is one who is willing to spend time with students, is willing to learn in areas outside his or her "major" field of mastered interest, is willing to be a fellow questioner or learner instead of a dispenser of answers, and is willing to admit sometimes, "I don't know," or perhaps, "We don't know," or, "What do you think?

The successful general education faculty will be uncommon in another sense: they will come from a variety of disciplines or colleges, even from non-faculty administrative staff positions. They will be extraordinarily uncommon, but they will have a tremendous impact on the desired common learning of undergraduates.

At Penn State, the General Education Program in Liberal Arts exists as a sort of interdisciplinary department--but with no faculty, all faculty hold appointments in academic departments--offering ten different courses bearing the titles of Humanities, International Understanding, and Social Sciences. No students are required to take these courses; they are offered as alternatives to discipline courses which also satisfy the university baccalaureate or distribution courses. Last year, over 6,000 students completed courses in general education. I say "completed" for many more dropped the courses, giving as their reasons "too much reading," "too much work," or "I have to spend more time on my major."

The faculty involved in teaching these courses come from all over the university. Humanities courses have been taught and successfully, I might add, by faculty from the departments of American Studies, English, French, Spanish, Philosophy, Religious Studies, History; and give heed to these, Anthropology, Political Science, Psychology; and these, Physics, Chemistry, Fuel Science, Mechanical Engineering, and Business Management and Organizational Behavior. Let me assure you before you start doubting that these are all, especially these latter groups, associate and full professors, respected in their departments and professions, known nationally and internationally for their scholarship.

Why then are they teaching General Education Humanities courses? Obviously, they want to. These are people who believe that the Humanities contain the record of the aspirations, successes, failures, foibles, and longings of the human race. As well-read, well-rounded human beings, they enjoy discussing the great books, the great ideas of the Western and sometimes non-Western cultural heritage with undergraduate students, especially freshmen and sophomores. Believe it or not, one can get in a rut teaching graduate students and undergraduate majors. The opportunity to teach Humanities gives one the opportunity to step back, as it were, look at himself or herself from a different perspective, and return to the normal responsibilities refreshed and inspired. I asked several of the faculty to prepare statements indicating why they taught Humanities. All indicated that a love for the material was the major factor. Someone who reads Plato, Lucretius, Dante, Virgil, Camus, the Bible, and other great books for personal pleasure will obviously enjoy teaching them. Few literature faculty, few philosophy faculty, or few history faculty would have the necessary credentials to teach physics in a major university, but could a physics faculty member teach Humanities? Here is a statement from an associate professor of physics who is up for promotion to professor this year and who teaches Humanities on a regular basis. Rather than give brief portions of statements from a number of faculty, his statement is reproduced here in its entirety.

> When considering why a physicist would teach subjects far removed from his discipline, the obvious conclusion is that he does it because he enjoys it. That basic truth is applicable in my own case. I have taught in the Humanities for the past decade and have obtained great enjoyment and personal fulfillment from the effort.
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> Too often, scientists are unconcerned about the societal and philosophical implications of their work. Too often, students see scientists as mere automatons, devoid of emotions or human feelings. Both scientists and students are wrong. Science is a human endeavor, carried on by real people who should never think of themselves as existing in a vacuum. The courses outside of physics which I teach help me to maintain that necessary human perspective.
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> Occasionally, students will ask who made me teach Humanities 101. I answer that nobody forced me and that I do it only because I want to do it. By that answer, I attempt to present myself as a model of an individual whose intellectual endeavors are not confined in a single narrow channel. Hopefully, this reinforces the impression that they are at the University to obtain an education, rather than merely vocational training. I even succeed in some instances.
>
> I believe that my teaching in Liberal Arts and Humanities makes me a better physicist and physics teacher. It would be easy for me to become stale if I taught only physics to science and engineering students. I'm positive that my physics performance would deteriorate and that my worth to the University would lessen if this happened. Dealing with students whose inclinations are other than technical keeps me feeling fresh. As

such, the University is better served by me as a physicist by allowing me this opportunity.

My perception of my situation is that the University, my students, and I have all benefited from my extra-physics activities. To be objective, it seems necessary to determine the cost associated with the benefit. Has my accomplishment within my discipline been diminished by my effort outside the discipline?

Obviously, I've not won the Nobel Prize in physics, nor am I ever likely to win it. This is true regardless of the effort I expend on the Humanities. Perhaps my research productivity would have been greater had I not spread my efforts about. But, perhaps it would not differ at all. I might have been able to maintain a closer affiliation with my colleagues in the physics community, but, then again, I might not. As I see the situation, my personal costs are potential while the benefits are actual.

In total, I am happier and more satisfied, both personally and professionally, by participating in teaching outside my discipline than I would have been if I had limited my pedagogical effort only to physics. If I were in a position to again choose between exclusive physics teaching or mixing physics and Humanities, I would certainly choose the latter.

Similar statements could be read from numbers of others involved.

But what about the students? What are their reactions? How are they served by having "amateur" instructors? They become active learners, as opposed to passive recipients. They are not afraid to challenge, to question, to offer alternative interpretations; for they sense that the instructor is a fellow-seeker of truth, and not a dispenser of truth. Students from the hard sciences and technologies especially appreciate such a class atmosphere. They welcome the opportunity to express an opinion without suffering penalty. If two chemicals are mixed in a lab experiment, the results can be, and better be, verified in a lab report. If a sufficient load is applied to a model girder, it will bend and collapse whether one likes it or not. But what does Dante really have to say to us? Or as a very good Humanities instructor put the question to a class, "On what level of Hell would Dante put Richard Nixon for his Watergate role?" These are questions of value that need to be discussed.

How often have we heard undergraduates ask "What good is this stuff anyhow? Why do we have to read these old books?" When the instructor is someone from another college or discipline, such questions are not raised. When Business Administration majors realize that a Professor of Management is teaching Humanities, they recognize that it must be important. When a Professor of Radio-Chemistry who is teaching Humanities gives his office where he may be reached as the Nuclear Reactor Building, the scientists and engineers in the class do not question the relevance of the course. They realize that it must be important or that Professor would not be there.

I do not mean to imply that faculty from the traditional humanities disciplines should not teach the interdisciplinary, general education Humanities courses; they should, and for the same reasons the others do: they too need a break from trying to mold students into their disciplinary image.

The people who teach in General Education are special: they are well-read, eager to learn, eager to share. They believe in what they are doing and they are willing to take certain professional risks to do so. But they have other qualities as well. In making the financial arrangements to have faculty from other colleges and disciplines teach in the Program, I follow no set pattern. Sometimes I actually pay the exact percentage of the salary, sometimes I provide funding for a graduate student or part-time replacement, sometimes I transfer funds to the departmental allotment for travel or other expenses, sometimes the additional funds are identified for the use of the faculty member involved.

Imagine my surprise last year when two faculty members, one from Psychology and one from Business Administration, expressed concern that we were not doing enough for our students and our uncommon faculty outside of the classroom. They proposed that we start a General Education Symposium--a meeting to which we would invite outside lecturers, provide a dinner for a few undergraduate students and their instructors, offer a public lecture in the evening, and close with a breakfast discussion the next morning. Before I could raise the obvious administrator's question regarding cost, they told me that they had spoken to their respective department heads and that they had agreed to return the funds provided from the General Education budget to me in order to offer the Symposium. A good response to the question, "What's in it for me?"

One of my fondest memories is of the two days John Ciardi, the poet and translator of Dante (whose version we use in Humanities), spent with us. The undergraduates who joined Professor Ciardi for dinner, the large audience at the lecture on Dante's view of Hell, and the faculty group who joined Ciardi for breakfast were engaged in General Education outside the classroom. Our plans are to enlarge this Symposium to include informal discussions in dormitories and other forums. We want the faculty and students to engage each other in the important issues of life and learning.

One other aspect of having an uncommon faculty teach in General Education is that of relevance. Let me give one example. A student from Engineering, seeking to satisfy a humanities distribution requirement by taking Humanities 101, would read Ibsen's play, An Enemy of the People, in the context of a "unit" discussing the pollution of the environment, especially the contamination of water supplies by mine acids, industrial wastes, and acid rain. Through other readings including current journalism, the student will confront the moral dilemmas regarding responsibility, concern for others, financial burdens, and human responses. The student could read the same play in a "straight" literature course and be bored by it all. But in the context of the Humanities course, and especially if the instructor is from a science or technology field, the student is often made aware of the relevance of literature and will possibly as a result read more literature, thus becoming a generally educated person.

I mentioned earlier that some 6,000 students take our General Education courses each year. Of these, probably 4,000 are in Humanities. From an undergraduate student population of approximately 56,000 that's not very many. Our General

Education Symposium has to date directly touched probably 250 students. Again, not many, but many of these few have been touched, have been engaged, and have stated that their lives have been changed. A few individuals have shared the common experience of intellectual uplift and stimulation. What more can we ask?